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Author(s): Teresa Noelle Roberts

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The Unicorn: Creature of Love

Teresa Noelle Roberts

The fierce, solitary and beautiful unicorn has appealed to man's imagination for centuries. The animal with a single spiralled horn figures in legends from all over Europe and the Near East; it even appears as far east as China, where it is called the Lin. The Lin is regarded as a heavenly, spiritual beast that appears at the birth of a sage.[1] In medieval Europe, the unicorn was thought to be an actual animal which, like the elephant, lived in places so remote that he was rarely seen.[2] Although the unicorn was real to many people in the Middle Ages, a complex system of legends built up which gave the beast a mystic significance.

There were many conceptions of the unicorn's appearance. Ctesias, a Greek naturalist of the fourth century BC, described him as similar to a wild ass, but having a single horn, the lower third of which was white, the middle third black, the upper third red.[3] By the medieval period, however, artistic convention portrayed the unicorn as a silvery-white beast having the head and body of a horse, the beard of a goat, the tail of a horse or a lion, and the legs of an antelope, which terminated in cloven hooves.[4]

The unicorn was noted for his wild, proud nature; he was impossible to capture without the help of a virgin girl. In the presence of a maiden, the beast would become so humble that he would kneel and rest his head in her lap. In this position, he would fall asleep and could be captured. Medieval scientists felt this attraction to virgins was the unicorn's identifying characteristic, "like the ones... attributed to every other creature."[5]

The unicorn, however, was not like every other creature. Its fabulous single horn was the center of many myths: it represented the "upper pole" from the king to the sun's zenith;[6] it could neutralize poison, and cure epilepsy and convulsions.[7] The unicorn himself came to symbolize the monastic life, because of his solitary nature.[8] The unicorn also represented the moon in its struggle against its enemy, the sun-lion. (This myth may explain the British Arms.) Robert Graves traces this moon-legend back to legends about the ancient Great Goddess, who was both the moon-goddess and the goddess of wisdom. In this context, the virgin who captures the unicorn represents the Great Goddess "capturing" the seeker of truth.[9]

Mr. Graves may have found the roots of what is known as the Virgin-Capture legend, but by the Middle Ages, the story's meaning had changed dramatically. No longer did it involve a pagan goddess and her worshiper. It now carried a wealth of both secular and religious symbolism.

If one wished to capture a unicorn, it was believed the hunters must bring a young girl to the forest and leave her there alone, preferably tied to a tree. Some sources suggested one's chances were better if the girl were naked, or if she were beautiful, but all agreed on one thing—she must be a virgin. If she were a virgin, and there were a unicorn in the area, he would go to the girl and fall asleep in her lap. If the girl were not a virgin, the unicorn would either ignore her or, according to some medieval accounts, run her through with his horn.[10]

Medieval bestiaries suggest possible reasons why unicorns are attracted to virgins. One explanation is strictly sexual—the lovely nude woman aroused the unicorn. Authors who favor this theory often tell of the unicorn sucking the girl's breasts and attempting other sexual familiarities[11] before falling asleep with his horn in a very symbolic position. Another theory is advanced by the twelfth century writer Alanus de Insulis. He based his explanation on the then-popular medical theory of opposing humours.[12] The fiery dry "humour," or nature, of the unicorn is drawn to the cool, moist air which is caused by the virgin's cold, pure humour. This change in temperature makes him so comfortable that he decides to take a nap.

By far the most common explanation of the Virgin-Capture lies within the virgin herself. The unicorn, it is theorized, is attracted to the "odor of virginity."[13] For some reason—accounts differ as to whether it is the unicorn's purity or his lewdness—he is drawn to this aura of chastity. Trust and love for the pure young girl overcomes the unicorn's elusiveness, and he falls into sort of an enchanted sleep.

This lovely tale may have been derived from a mundane, even slightly bawdy, hunting story. In the early seventeenth century, Fray Luis de Urréta, in his book, Historia de los Grandes y Remotos Reynos de la Etiopia, Monarchia del Emperador Preste Juan, told how hunters in northern Africa claimed to capture rhinoceroses with the help of a trained female monkey. The monkey would distract the rhinoceros by tickling it and rubbing its belly. Eventually the rhinoceros would lie down and stretch out to more fully enjoy itself. At that point, the hunters could creep up and stab it in the belly. In The Lore of the Unicorn, Odell Shepard suggests that this story travelled from North Africa to the Middle East, and from there to Europe. As it travelled, the rhinoceros changed to a unicorn—an animal equally familiar to Europeans of the day; the monkey turned into a human girl.[14]

The early Christians apparently found this legend a perfect vehicle for allegory.[15] To what had been a relatively simple story, they added layers of meaning, and new symbolism born of their creed. Indeed, it did not take long for the Christians to adopt the unicorn as a symbol of Christ Himself.

Saint Basil, an early Church father, wrote, "The unconquerable nature of God is likened to that of a unicorn."[16] Saint Ambrose said, "Who is this Unicorn but the only-begotten Son of God?"[17] God was born on earth in the person of Jesus Christ, through the Virgin Mary. In effect, He, like the unicorn, was captured by a maiden. As the proudest and most aloof of beasts was tamed by a virgin, God Himself became the little child of the Virgin.

As the comparison of the unicorn to Christ became more widely accepted, theologians found other points of comparison. Tertullian, another Church father, likened the upright part of the Cross, the section above the crossbeam, to the unicorn's horn.[18] The horn points up to Heaven, as the Cross does both literally and figuratively. Another allegory, one that apparently had its origins in actual folklore, is that of the water-conning. In ancient times, and throughout the Middle Ages, it was believed that snakes could poison water sources during the night. In the morning, other animals would see the venom floating on top of the water. Since they could not drink, they would await the arrival of the unicorn. The unicorn would kneel and dip his horn into the poisoned water; this would rid the water of the snake's venom. Churchmen explained that the snake was the Devil, and the water which he poisoned was the world. The unicorn, because of his purifying horn, represented Christ the Redeemer, saving the world from the poison of the Evil One.[19]

In medieval accounts of the Virgin-Capture, the virgin is often described as grasping the unicorn's horn as he is captured by the hunters. One medieval writer explains that Jesus has "raised...a horn of salvation...by the intercession of the mother of God...."[20] Medievalist Margaret Freeman puts it, "The animal's submission to the virgin maid is an allegory of the Annunciation and Incarnation."[21] To the Catholics of the Middle Ages, who were extremely devoted to the Virgin, this legend has a special appeal. As the cult of the Virgin grew in popularity, the legend inevitably grew with it.

Eventually, the Virgin-Capture legend took on many of the trappings of an actual stag hunt. This more complex

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allegory is known as the Holy Hunt, and virtually every aspect of the Hunt has religious meaning. The chief huntsman is the Holy Spirit acting through the Angel Gabriel; he drives the unicorn to the virgin, who tames it. Gabriel is the angel of the Annunciation, and to this point, the legend represents the Annunciation and Incarnation. When the other hunters kill the unicorn, this represents the Crucifixion. In this legend, the unicorn itself is described as a small animal about the size of a kid; its size represents Christ's humility.[22] Its one horn, which may represent the unity of the Father and the Son, is an antidote for poison, and this is why the unicorn is killed. Christ's death, like the unicorn's, is so humans may "live."

Despite the popularity of the Virgin-Capture/Holy Hunt legend as an allegory of Christ, the legend's original sexual significance was not lost. The version of the Virgin-Capture story told in Provencal bestiaries was more like an unholy hunt. The unicorn attempts to sexually molest the virgin, and so is sacrificed by the hunters. In this version, the story is an allegory of lust overcome by spiritual love,[23] or perhaps the Devil, in the form of the unicorn, overcome by purity.[24]

In later medieval times, as the ideal of courtly love became widely accepted among the upper classes, the unicorn became a symbol of the good side of physical love. Richard de Fournival, in the mid-thirteenth century, wrote a long romantic poem which described courtship using a series of comparisons with the animal kingdom. One example which he used was the story of the unicorn and the maiden. The unicorn represents a young suitor who is mistreated and betrayed by his lady, but it also represents a haughty man who is finally conquered by love.[25] By the fourteenth century, the unicorn had become an accepted symbol of the courtly lover, who undergoes many hardships and trials before winning—or being won by—his lady.[26]

The unicorn functions both as a Christ-symbol and as a symbol of the lover in the famous tapestry series The Hunt of the Unicorn. This set of seven tapestries was probably woven in or near Touraine, France, in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.[27] All but the first and seventh tapestries are believed to have been made in celebration of the marriage of Anne of Brittany and Louis XII of France, which took place in 1497; the first and seventh are apparently not part of the original set, and may have been made for the wedding of Anne's daughter, seventeen years later.[28]

There is no definite documentation as to the date or original ownership of the tapestries, but several clues support the Anne of Brittany hypothesis. In the sixth tapestry, the lord and lady of the castle strongly resemble existing portraits of Louis and Anne. The lady wears a Breton headdress and a dress similar to contemporary descriptions of Anne. In several accounts, she is said to favor gowns of "yellow-brown, red and gold brocade."[29]

The tapestries, which are now considered to be masterpieces of medieval art, were virtually lost for centuries. During the French Revolution, when all artwork that featured royal emblems was ordered destroyed, large sections were cut out of the fifth tapestry,[30] which, unfortunately, is the one which actually depicts the Virgin-Capture. After the Revolution, the tapestries were used by peasants to protect vegetables in storage bins, until the mid-1850's, when they were discovered by Count Hippolyte de la Rochefoucauld.[31] They remained in the de la Rochefoucauld family until 1923, when they were sold to John D. Rockefeller, Jr.[32] He donated in 1935[33] to the Cloisters, where they are now on display.

The tapestries depict the entire Holy Hunt in great detail. The first tapestry shows the start of the hunt; the second shows the water-conning; the third shows the unicorn attempting to escape his pursuers by plunging into a stream. In the fourth tapestry, he fights off the hunters, but in the fifth, the virgin wins him. In the sixth tapestry, the unicorn is killed and presented to the lord and lady of the castle; in the final tapestry, he is resurrected, and depicted in captivity.

The fifth tapestry is so damaged that all that remains of the virgin is her hand, and a bit of brocade sleeve, resting on the unicorn's neck. The brocade is the same yellow-brown, red and gold that the lady of the castle, "Anne of Brittany," is wearing in the sixth tapestry. While it is dangerous to speculate on the basis of such scanty evidence, it is generally believed that the virgin is Anne.[34] As she was a widow when she married Louis, this seems faintly odd! Some art historians theorize that the tapestries may have been made partly to legitimize the royal marriage. In order to wed Anne, Louis had had an issueless marriage of twenty years annulled; Anne herself had been widowed only nine months.[35] By association with the virgin of the legend, and, therefore, with the Blessed Virgin, Anne is proclaimed pure. The marriage is sanctified.

The fifth tapestry strengthened the association of the virgin with the Virgin Mary by the use of several of her symbols. The capture apparently takes place within a fenced garden, or hortus conclusus. The hortus conclusus was a symbol of Mary, and the Incarnation,[36] as well as representing chastity in general. The apple tree in the garden symbolizes the Holy Ghost coming to Mary at the Annunciation. The apple's sweet flesh is a symbol of sexual pleasure[37]—a reminder of the two meanings of the unicorn.

Throughout the tapestries, the unicorn is clearly an allegorical representation of Christ. In the water-conning tapestry, he is Christ the Redeemer, saving the world from its sins. In the third and fourth tapestries, he represents Christ persecuted by His enemies. The hunters in these tapestries are notable ugly and vicious-looking; their faces show that they are Pharisees and enemies of God.[38] Both in the fourth tapestry, in which they attack the unicorn, and in the sixth, in which they kill him, several of the hunters obviously delight in his suffering.

Not so the huntsman sounding his horn in the fourth tapestry, and later sounding the prise, or death-knell, in the sixth. His face is understanding and compassionate, and well it should be, for he represents the Archangel Gabriel, the angel of the Annunciation. His scabbard bears the inscription Ave Regina Coelorum, "Hail, Queen of the Heavens!" While these are not the actual words of the Annunciation, they are the title of a well-known hymn to the Virgin.[39] People would have understood the intended point.

When the unicorn is killed and brought to the castle, he is decorated with a wreath of holly and oak leaves. The holly's prickly leaves are an illusion to the crown of thorns, while the leaves of the oak, the strongest of trees, represent the endurance of the Christian faith.[40] The unicorn is thus the crucified Jesus. In the last tapestry, the unicorn, like Christ, is resurrected. In the words of Margaret Freeman, the tapestries depict the "whole divine plan for man's Redemption."[41]

The proud man tamed by the love of a pure woman is a fitting theme for a set of tapestries intended as a wedding gift, and so the theme of courtly love is not ignored in the tapestires. The wild fierce unicorn defies the hunters, as a young man defies society. The unicorn is tamed by the maiden like a young man is tamed—bound into society—by love and marriage. The unicorn tamed symbolizes marriage as well as maidenly purity;[42] therefore, the widow-bride Anne taking the part of the virgin is not as unlikely as it may seem. She is a sort of symbolic virgin.

When the lover-unicorn is killed, the general interpretation is that the lover has been betrayed by his lady. In the tapestries, however, the unicorn is butchered far from the virgin; she seems less an accomplice than a pawn. The sad expression of the lady of the castle, who probably was the maiden, hints that the unicorn was not the only one betrayed. Perhaps, in this context, the murdered unicorn represents a man crossed in love by the world in general.

This idea seems especially convincing in light of the seventh tapestry. Here the unicorn is miraculously raised from the dead. Although his wounds are not fully healed, they are not disfiguring; they almost heighten the beauty of his milk-white coat. He is the lover captured and captivated by his lady, and restored to life—society—by her pure

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love. The golden collar and chain which he wears represent marital bonds; he is chained to a pomegranate tree, which symbolizes fertility and the consummation of marriage.[43] Despite his bonds, the unicorn wears a blissful expression.

The blissful expression is suited to a newlywed, but, if one interprets it another way, it is also suited to the resurrected Christ. The hortus conclusus in which he rests here may be Paradise. The pomegranate, as well as being a fertility symbol, is also a symbol of life after death;[44] while this may seem like an odd combination. What are children but a kind of immortality?

The seventh tapestry culminates the development of two seemingly opposite legends. The unicorn's meanings, however, are not as contradictory as they may appear. The unicorn in the Virgin-Capture/Holy Hunt cycle represents Christ, the personification of divine love. In the lover-unicorn legend, the unicorn represents the courtly lover, and ultimately a loving husband, a personification of human love. Human love and divine love are vastly different concepts, but the fact remains: the unicorn is an embodiment of love.

NOTES

[1]Henry Turner Bailey and Ethel Pool, Symbolism for Artists: Creative and Interpretive (Worchester, Massachusetts: The Davis Press, 1925), p. 138.

[2]Odell Shepard, The Lore of the Unicorn (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 53.

[3]Ibid., p. 27.

[4]Turner Bailey and Pool, p. 203.

[5]Shepard, p. 50.

[6]Robert Graves, The White Goddess, amended and enlarged ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), p. 411.

[7]Peter Fingersten, The Eclipse of Symbolism (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1970), p. 142.

[8]Turner Bailey and Pool, p. 149.

[9]Graves, p. 50.

[10]Shepard, p. 50.

[11]Ibid.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid, p. 56.

[14]Ibid., p. 67.

[15]Ibid., p. 69.

[16]Ibid., p. 81.

[17]Ibid.

[18]Ibid., p. 282, footnote 36.

[19]Margaret Freeman, The Unicorn Tapestries, ed. Linda Sipress (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1974), p. 8.

[20]Fingersten, p. 146.

[21]Freeman, p: 27.

[22]Shepard, p. 48.

[23]Graves, p. 256.

[24]Shepard, p. 49.

[25]Ibid., pp. 54-55.

[26]Freeman, p. 9.

[27]Barbaralee Diamonstein, ed., The Art World: a Seventy-five Year Treasury of ARTnews (New York: ARTnews Books, 1977), p. 133.

[28]James J. Rorimer, The Cloisters (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1963), p. 162.

[29]Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Unicorn Tapestries at the Cloisters: A Picture Book (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1962), p. 32.

[30]Rorimer, p. 174.

[31]Freeman, p. 48.

[32]Diamonstein, p. 69.

[33]Ibid., p. 99.

[34]Rorimer, p. 25.

[35]Metropolitan, p. 25.

[36]Freeman, p. 26

[37]Ibid.

[38]Ibid., p. 14.

[39]Ibid., p. 30.

[40]Ibid., p. 35.

[41]Ibid., p. 8.

[42]Metropolitan, p. 25.

[43]Ibid., p. 38.

[44]Freeman, p. 37

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Unicorns

Perhaps the greatest proof of our decadence

Is that unicorns have become trite.

Somehow

They've managed to commercialize

Unicorns!

Cocktail napkins, children's toys-

Unicorns are hot sellers.

...And the real tragedy is,

They've become comic-

Shetland ponies with a horn.

Once only a virgin could

Achieve a unicorn;

Today any little whore who can plunk down the money

Can have one

Plastered across her overworked chest

In metallic colors.

What can be used for a culture

Which sells Christ symbols

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